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## **UNRWA Photographs 1950-1978: A View of History or Shaped by History?**

The establishment and the content of the photographic archive of UNRWA, and more broadly, of the audiovisual branch, are best deciphered within the historical and political constraints that have shaped the Palestinian and refugee issues as well as UNRWA's role, the institution's mandate and program since 1950. In this case, history and images are more than ever inextricably linked, as the former has also been determined, to an extent, by the latter<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, recent Palestinian history has also been the story of an ongoing struggle for visibility, beginning from a void, an absence (following the 1948 war and the creation of only one of the two states defined in the 1947 United Nations Partition plan). From the denial of their legitimate belonging to Palestine in the first two decades of the emergence of the Zionist project - as expressed by the Zionist slogan "a land without people for a people without land" or Golda Meir's in the 1960s "Palestinians, who are they? They do not exist" in the 1960s - to the slow process of earning recognition and acknowledgement over time, up until the negotiations for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The UNRWA's archive of the humanitarian plight displays the specificity of Palestinian refugee history, they are the site, as well as the result of a political, cultural and historical confrontation at an international level.

Historical periods have impacted representations of refugees; images were first produced to document and publicize the programs of the humanitarian agency so as to

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<sup>1</sup> See Latte Abdallah, S., 2007, « Regards, visibilité historique et politique des images sur les réfugiés palestiniens depuis 1948 », in *Le Mouvement social* n°219-220, Spring-Summer, p. 65-91.

increase donations<sup>2</sup> and, from this perspective, to record and document the refugees' situations and events. They were aimed to interpellate financial donors - international organizations and the donor countries (and above all towards the major ones, which have been slightly changing over time but remained in North America and Europe<sup>3</sup>). Secondly, they aimed to interpellate the UN, local and international press, governments of the refugees' host countries, refugees themselves and the UNRWA's staff. Thus, audience and reception have been key in the production of these images.

Institutional documents, photos and films produced by the UNRWA since its creation in 1950, have indeed been constrained by an array of limitations especially until 1974, when the PLO was recognized by the UN, as well as by most countries around the world, as the representative of the Palestinian people. From this point onward, the PLO became one of the UNRWA's official interlocutors and began to have a say in the institution's policy and communication strategy. The UNRWA's scope of action and services expanded after the 1967 war and its ensuing second massive exodus of Palestinians. It was also buttressed by the reconstitution of the Palestinian national movement and the establishment of Palestinian political structures. Over time, the UNRWA became vested with the mission of protecting Palestinian refugees during conflicts within the frame of international law, as for example, with the case of the outbreak of the Lebanese war in 1975, or in the first Intifada in 1987. All these changes in mission and mandate had ultimately a radical impact on the production of images and communication strategy, the process being albeit gradual.

The focus, in this text, will be on the first decades following the initial procedures and programs of the agency's photographic and film production unit, between the years 1950 to 1978. The 1970s and the 1980s are pivotal decades marking change in UNRWA's representations of the refugee issue, however the year 1978 is an appropriate marker to frame the argument of this text because it corresponds to Myrtle Winter-Chaumeny's retirement and to the relocation of the Agency in Vienna as a result of the violent turmoil caused by the Lebanese civil war. The UNRWA's

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<sup>2</sup> UNRWA does not have a proper budget and depends on contributions renewed annually. This structural weakness has given a greater role to its communication strategy.

<sup>3</sup> Since 1950, the USA has been giving more than 60% of its budget, followed by the UK, and today by the European Community which became its second main contributor. The Arab countries are also key financial backers. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the US and Great Britain were providing the Agency with 90% of its budget.

historical stills<sup>4</sup> are at the core of this short text, whose ambition is to elucidate insights and decipher them within a broader context - i.e., in relation to the constitution of the agency's audiovisual branch and thus in comparison with the films - and, above all, to discuss how they have mirrored the political struggle for visibility and/or documented refugee history.

*Photography as an Act of Reality: Building the Photo and Audiovisual Branch*

Until 1967, the UNRWA's photographs and certainly films were strongly shaped by international will - initially - of isolating humanitarian action (relief) from politics - as it was instituted by the UN in December 1948 with the creation of the Conciliation Commission, on the one side, and of the UNRPR (a humanitarian relief umbrella) on the other<sup>5</sup>. Until 1950, the UNRPR coordinated the work of the Red Cross - the ICRC<sup>6</sup> in what was called Arab Palestine (West Bank) and the League of the National Societies of the Red Cross in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon - and of the Quakers (American Friends Service Committee) in the Gaza strip. From the beginning, the Quakers played a different role, they were mediators vested with a political mission. They did not comply to the separation between the two realms of action, as evidenced in the images they produced – a single silent film and stills. These images contrast sharply with the images of the Red Cross and later of UNRWA until 1967, which all together display coherent and recurrent representations of the land of Palestine and of the refugees.

In 1949 and 1950, soon after the 1948 exodus, it was almost impossible to film or photograph events in Palestine, even to document the plight of those who were then referred to as the “Arab refugees”. A UN film maker, Mr. Wagg, summoned to Gaza by the Quakers to record their action faced great difficulties in this mission:

“He [Mr. Wagg] reports that he is encountering very considerable resistance in the film division of the UN to his project because they are

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<sup>4</sup> This text relies more broadly on UNRWA's audiovisual archive and on interviews with former photographers, filmmakers and employees of the its Public Information Office. Most of them did not want their names to appear.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees.

<sup>6</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross.

closely allied with groups particularly sympathetic to Israel, who are not very anxious to have the needs of the Arab refugees presented”<sup>7</sup>.

This resistance implied a strong emphasis on isolating humanitarian images from what could be political or historical images. Writing to Stanton Griffis, head of UNRPR, Mr. Evans, director of the Quaker mission, insisted on that point concerning a UN photographic report on the refugees’ conditions in the Gaza strip aimed at fundraising. The fighting was still going on then:

“He also photographed bomb damage in the town. I made a point of avoiding all photography and activity indicating interest in the military aspects of the affair, since my permission had been obtained on the basis of the refugee story only”, i.e. on photographs only showing the “need” and “relief operations”<sup>8</sup>.

As is clear in the Red Cross and UNRWA films and photographs, the political was understood in a very broad sense because of the innately political nature of territorial belonging. These representations were indeed all together masking, or silencing, the historical conditions and the reality of a land conflict, its belligerents and stakes, and the social identity of the refugees prior to their exodus<sup>9</sup>.

This purview was reiterated throughout the 1950s and the 1960s: “During the 1960s” explains M. Z. in charge of one of the Public Information Office of UNRWA, “the political environment did not allow to call things by their names”<sup>10</sup>. A former UNRWA photographer recalls,

“We could not say for instance ‘the Allenby bridge or the Karameh camp has been shelled by the Israelis’, we had to say ‘it has been bombed’. Because we were UN and a humanitarian agency. We were supposed to help the refugees not say who did that”<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Charles R. Read, Field Director, to Bronson Clark, Palestine Desk, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1949/AFSC Archives.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Mr. Evans to Mr. Stanton Griffis, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1948/AFSC Archives.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed study on the representations of the Palestinian refugees through humanitarian images (those of the Quakers, the Red Cross and the UNRWA). See Latte Abdallah, S., 2005, “La part des absents. Les images en creux des réfugiés palestiniens”, in Latte Abdallah, S. (ed.), 2005, *Images aux frontières. Représentations et constructions sociales et politiques. Palestine, Jordanie 1948-2000*, Beyrouth, IFPO, p. 67-102 ; Latte abdallah, S., 2007, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Amman, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, M. N., Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2004.

This was the mindset until Giorgio Giacomelli was appointed Commissioner general (1985-1991), when the UNRWA 's mandate and the international political environment changed and when the head of the agency began to grant increased attention to film and photographic production:

“In the 80’s it was a great period. We cannot say that there was a real policy or a communication concerted line and consciousness but Giorgio Giacomelli was supporting film production, [he] wanted things to be called by their names and was more committed. It has to be said that it was the time of the violent invasion of Lebanon by the Israelis. It is a turning point in UNRWA films ”.<sup>12</sup>

Until then, there had been several breakthroughs, they had triggered the slow process of change. A main concern had been limitations of material resources to “maintain the audiovisual department alive, which was already not an easy thing. We had scarce means. Nobody like[d] UNRWA. It was set up to keep Palestinians calm, so there is a real and big battle around UNRWA and its films”<sup>13</sup>.

Building from scratch a photo section and an audiovisual branch, that later on subverted initial limitations to document historical events more accurately, was at once a major challenge, an innovative project and a political strategy. The enterprise owes a lot to Myrtle Winter-Chaumeny, who, since 1954, headed the small photographic section from within the Education Department created by Alexander Shaw from UNESCO in 1950, at the UNRWA’s headquarter office in Beirut. He selected a group of talented Palestinian refugee young men, dispatched them to Cairo for a few months to train as film makers and script writers. Aside from the photographs, the section produced few documentaries and educational film strips. From 1954 onwards, the photo section’s staff started to grow and by 1978, claimed a staff that exceeded 20 persons. “She [Myrtle Winter] had power within UNRWA, she was very strong”, remembers S. H., a former script writer, “she knew how to make projects succeed. It is thanks to her that there had been money to make cinema and develop the audiovisual at UNRWA. She started it all”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, R.W., former deputy director (1979-1998) of the Press Information Department of UNRWA, Amman, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Idem.

<sup>14</sup> Beirut, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2004.

This office articulated three sections, still photo, film and art design. In the 1960s, the office was expanded into the Audiovisual Branch Office (one of the three sections of the Public Information Office which also comprised the Publication Branch and the Translation Branch) as film production developed rapidly. Considering the context of historical invisibility of the refugees on the one hand, and the currency of the 1948 war's history propagated by Israeli official historiography of that period<sup>15</sup> on the other hand, the photographs captured by Myrtle Winter and the UNRWA's team of photographers were strong "certificate[s] of presence"<sup>16</sup>. The specificity of photography is, indeed as Roland Barthes postulated, to "ratify what it represents"<sup>17</sup>. It is not to remember the past but to be an "emanation of a past reality"<sup>18</sup>. It poses, more than any other art, "an immediate presence to the world - a co-presence". It poses a presence which is "not only political ('to participate by the image in contemporary events') but "is also metaphysical."<sup>19</sup>



*Naber al-Bared refugee camp, near Tripoli (Lebanon), 1952. Photo by Myrtle Winter- Chaumeny*

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<sup>15</sup> Till the new writing of the 1948 foundation war by the "new Israeli historians" since the 1980s, namely Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, and Tom Segev and others.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, R., 1980, *La chambre Claire. Note sur la Photographie*, Éditions de l'Étoile/Gallimard/Seuil, p. 133.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.



*Mia Mia camp, near Sidon (Lebanon), 1952*

### *On the Photographs Seen through the Films*

Until 1967, most of the humanitarian images show recurrent representations that display what I will identify, using Roland Barthes' words, as a *naturalization* of refugee history<sup>20</sup>. I only mention some of them briefly here<sup>21</sup>. *Les Errants de Palestine*<sup>22</sup>, *Sands of Sorrow*<sup>23</sup> or the UNRWA films produced in the 1960s display a total rupture between the ongoing situation of the refugees and their previous life. Humanitarian agencies seem to be intervening as if the exodus was the starting point of the history of the persons, on a *tabula rasa*. Refugees are thus presented as eternal wanderers, without roots, as poor people, passive and sometimes even idle. An identity is created for refugees that takes the place of any other social identity, such as that of a

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Barthes, R., 1957, *Mythologies*, Paris, Gallimard.

<sup>21</sup> For more details, see Latte Abdallah, S., 2005, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> ICRC, 1950.



peasant or a person engaging in social and economic activity, etc. Any other approach otherwise would have been immediately construed as a political act, insofar as it is related to the land. The conflict having been silenced, the refugees were represented as victims of an unknown disaster, which might have even been a natural catastrophe. Representations of Palestine, as the Holy Land, served too well this negation of history. Most of the films reiterate an image of a land where Christian traces and references are dominant, as well as syncretically, where the three monotheistic religions claim birthplaces. The land is presented as saturated with monuments and archeological vestiges, but also as a site of recurrent, though unexplained, conflicts including the war of 1948 that has no specific history<sup>24</sup>. The historical narrative is erased and replaced by a mythic representation of time. In most of these productions, the structure of presentations is similar: biblical times come first, then ancient civilizations or archeology, sometimes including the Crusades. The footage moves from showing a number of monuments to the consequences of the last conflict, namely the plight of the “Arab refugees”. Constant back and forth leaps travel between a mythical time and the contemporary daily life of the refugees<sup>25</sup>.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the new education programs of the UNRWA - more consensual than previous ones in that they were not mostly oriented towards resettlement in the host countries - stimulated investment in film production, for the institution’s promotion of a new and positive image of the refugees. Most of the films of the 1960s then centered around the education and training of the refugees, so that inactivity would no longer be essentialized. The target was the second generation of Palestinian refugees born in the camps, to whom the UNRWA offered an opportunity to change their destiny. Hence was the focus of films more geared towards valorizing individual stories and positive portraits of refugees<sup>26</sup>.

Interestingly, the political and material constraints that shaped production had less impact on still photography than on film production. The Quakers’ photographs aside,

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<sup>23</sup> UN, 1950.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance UNRWA, *Tomorrow Begins Today*, pre-1967. These representations are also spread by the *National Geographic Magazine* between 1948 and 1967 as shown by Annelies Moors. See 2005, “Framing the ‘Refugee Question’: the National Geographic Magazine 1948-1967”, in Latte Abdallah, S. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 43-59.

<sup>25</sup> See as an example UNRWA, *The Silver Lining*, 1964.

<sup>26</sup> See UNRWA, *A Journey to Understanding*, 1961; UNRWA, *Tomorrow Begins Today*, pre-1967; UNRWA, *The Silver Lining*, 1964 or UNRWA, *Flowers of Ramallah*, 1963.

in distinct contrast with the other agencies manufacture of image and narrative (even their silent film)<sup>27</sup>, the images of the Red Cross and the UNRWA present a more diverse gamut. The Red cross photographs show the 1948 mass exodus of Palestinians on foot and by buses as well as the native places from which the refugees fled. They also evidence population transfers between the Jewish and Arab zones during the war, bombings and exchanges of war prisoners. They identify belligerents clearly, as well as the conflict's evolution. Some pictures of the Deir Yassin massacre, forgotten in the written archives of the ICRC, were kept with Jacques de Reynier's report, who was then in charge of the ICRC. They were early proof that supported testimonies of war practices.

This last example explains in part why films and still photography did not bear the same constraints, they simply obeyed different purposes. Not all photos, and notably not those of the ICRC, were intended for mass communication and fundraising at the international level, as were films. The UNRWA films were made under close supervision and a strict protocol, the director or the person shooting and producing the images was often not directly involved in the conception (although this changed overtime). The script was usually written by a person appointed for the task and had to be approved by the head of the audiovisual branch and by the Commissioner General's Office (whose approval also had to be obtained for the final version of the film before its dissemination). The result were documentaries wholly lacking in originality and/or creativity. As Jean-Paul Colleyn has stated, in most institutional films, attention is indeed concentrated more on content than on form:

“The cameraman seems to have the mission of shooting images meant to accompany a documentary text: most of the time, he films wide shots and the close-ups are either anecdotic either ‘sentimental’, as for example still shots portraits of children or elderly. In this mode of documentary production, (...), the image operator ignores the final editing his images will be submitted to. The cameraman's role is coverage, he is not supposed to look for interactions or to shoot sequences”<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> See Latte Abdallah, S., 2005, “La part des absents. Les images en creux des réfugiés palestiniens”, in Latte Abdallah, S. (ed.), op. cit., p. 67-102.

<sup>28</sup> Colleyn, J.-P., 2005, « L'analyse des images d'archives : point de vue théorique et étude d'un cas », in Latte Abdallah, S. (ed.), op. cit., p. 31.

This was certainly the case for the UNRWA's film productions - even more so as many shots were used in different films, to illustrate distinct texts.

Moreover, up until the 1980s, the protagonists - the Palestinian refugees - are never interviewed, and either a voice-over, from the agency, or a guest speaker (as with *A Journey to Understanding*, 1961) - overshadows their individuality. The gradual change in representation that began in 1967 can be detected in the structure of productions. In *Aftermath*, for instance, a film on the 1967 exodus, displacements and conditions of the war are documented, and for the first time a Palestinian, an UNRWA employee, gives his views on the impact of the arrival of displaced populations to Amman. Since that date, the tragic consequences of conflicts become subject to documentation, as with the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991) and then the first Intifada (1987-1993). Although the neutral position of the agency implied striking a sharp balance and complying to the many red lines, refugee history and the rights of the Palestinian people are finally mentioned<sup>29</sup>. So are UN resolutions and the evolution of the debate around the Palestinian question at the UN and international arena. Palestinian social and cultural identity<sup>30</sup>, cultural traditions and heritage are widely displayed, in line with representations put forth by the national movement<sup>31</sup>. It is only with the first Intifada, recalls a former UNRWA film director that :

“I could have in my films more critical interviews, which were talking of Israeli practices and of the exodus of 1948 and 1967. I wanted to make interviews of persons, in their language, and not only add this voiceover which spoke in their place through a text that we wrote. They accepted that Palestinian refugees speak of their own experience, that we see things from their view. Giacomelli even urged us to go further. The first film I showed him, he told me ‘it is too shy, if people suffer then we have to see it on screen’. And at last, we had Betacam material”<sup>32</sup>.

Contrary to what Barthes wrote about cinema in general, the UNRWA productions were so closely monitored until 1967 that no off-camera, or “*champ aveugle*”<sup>33</sup> as he named it, could be imagined or perceived. A *champ aveugle* exists in photography only when a detail (called *punctum*) comes to break, contradicts, captures the attention from what is cast

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<sup>29</sup> See *The Palestinians*, 1973-74; *The Palestinians do have rights. The Question of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People*, 1979; *Refugee Visiting Abandoned Home in 1948*, 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Like for instance *Palestinian Portraits*, 1987.

<sup>31</sup> See *Culture/heritage*, 1990; *Palestinian Embroidery*, 1990.

<sup>32</sup> G. N., Vienna, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

as the main subject. Some of the UNRWA stills do indeed leave more freedom for interpretation, allowing a less stealth assignment than do the films. Some, even those similar to some frames in the films - as if they had been taken out of them – are able to carry the view and viewer outside the frame. The themes of the photographs are recurrent: the camps' infrastructures, tents; the people, mainly elderly man or women, women and children; schools and health consultations, etc. They do not document historical events and, in some cases, go as far as to blur history by erasing the context of the image. Some of the photographs look like lithographs, underscoring the impression of being inscribed in a never-ending past.

Until 1967, photos tended to “universalize” refugees<sup>34</sup> in a way common to most humanitarian iconography, as described by Liisa Malkki. This representation is predicated on the “common assumption that ‘the refugee’ - apparently stripped of the specificity of culture, place and history - is human in the most basic, elementary sense”<sup>35</sup>. The numerous photos of women and children are archetypal of humanitarian iconography, where figures embody the notion of displacement and a bare state of humanity they are supposed to incarnate<sup>36</sup>. Photographs of the elderly incarnate these same notions. They underscore the quasi-absence of young or mature men in the UNRWA photographic archive. In the overall, most of UNRWA's earliest body of photographs fit the universal representation of a “human-victim”<sup>37</sup> deprived of any specific identity. This marks a change in the worldwide representation of refugees during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; while European refugees of the century's first decades and at the beginning of the Cold War were depicted as political refugees, in the case of the Palestinians, the signification became narrowed to a strictly universalist humanitarian purview. This change is noticeable from the onset of the establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), so from 1950 onwards. The impact of this transformation in mindset was for all representation of the refugees that followed, who were mostly originating from the ‘south’, to be attached to destitution. Palestinians became refugees at this historical turning point when the UNHCR was established, even though they were not included in its mandate.

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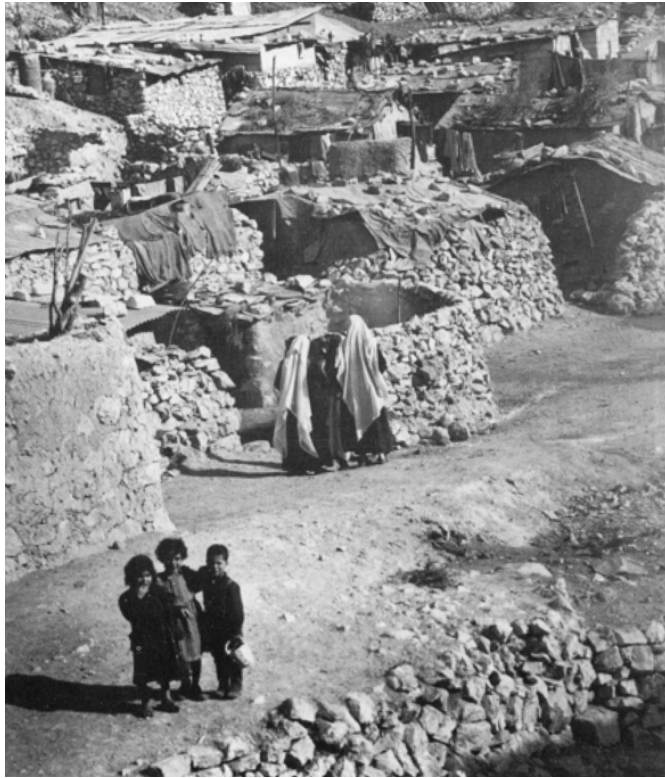
<sup>33</sup> Barthes, R., *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>34</sup> Malkki, L., 1995, *Purity and Exile. Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, p. 9.

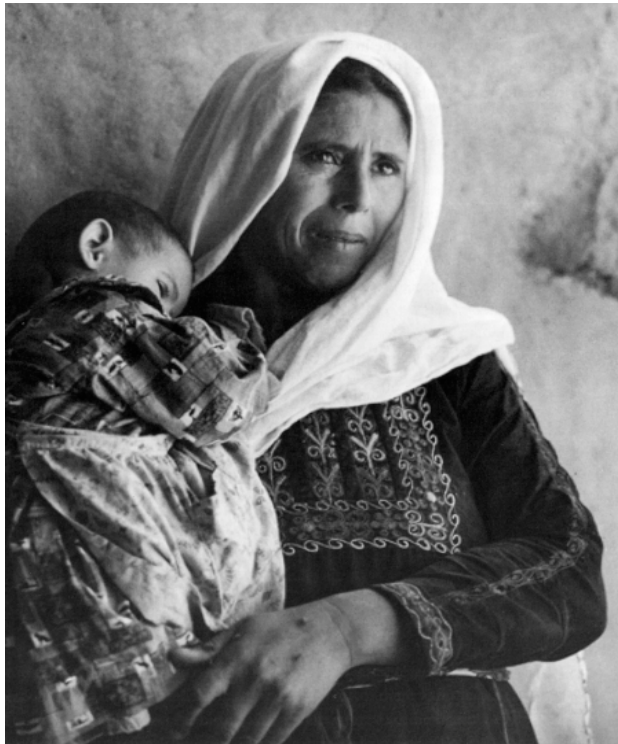
<sup>35</sup> Malkki L., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Malkki L., *op. cit.*, p. 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Badiou, A., 1993, *L'Éthique. Essai sur la conscience du mal*, Paris, Hatier.



*From Wadi Seer to Amman new camp (Jordan), 1959*



*Refugee Camp in Gaza*



*No caption*

In spite of this, some of UNRWA's photographs defied these constraints in an artistic manner that suggested there was more than what is in the frame and a representation of time that Roland Barthes would have identified as "a pure representation of time". There is another "*punctum* (another 'stigmatè') beside the 'detail'. This new *punctum*, is not one of form but of intensity"<sup>38</sup>.



*Jisr el Basha Refugee Camp in the outskirts of Beirut, Lebanon, 1952. Photograph by Myrtilé Winter - Chaumeny*

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<sup>38</sup> Barthes, R., *op.cit.*, p. 148-150.



*Aqabat Jabr refugee camp, Jericho (West Bank)*

### *History Blurred and Reinvented*

Aside from the image itself, what makes a photograph historical are the date and title and/or caption that contribute to situating and contextualizing it. According to Barthes, for any image, “the date is part of the photo: not because it conveys a style but because one cannot but notice the date, one can imagine life, death, the inexorable passing out of generations”<sup>39</sup>. The name of the photographer could also be an important, though not a necessary, indication.

Many photographs captured before 1967 and even later do not carry a date, they do not depict a historic event nor are they accompanied by a caption that might help determine its time and location. This is probably the result of UNRWA’s initially temporary mandate, compounded by the general political environment. During those years, there was hardly any

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

awareness of an archive potentially being established. From 1967 onward, there is noticeable change: few photos are without date or appear to blur history, events are integral to the framing of a photograph and are the subject of numerous pictures. This is particularly clear in the many photographs of the 1967 exodus and the effects of the Lebanese civil war on Palestinian refugees and camps. Thanks to the captions - which are generally useful even if a few are inaccurate or too general - there are clues to determine when, roughly, a photograph was taken. Often times, the dating is done in terms of historical periods defined by key historical events: the years following the 1948 exodus; before, during or after 1967 (as the camps of Jericho were almost emptied after the second exodus); between 1967 and 1975 (beginning of the Lebanese war) and after, etc. The issue of date is also key as far as films are concerned: indeed, some only carry the indication 1948-1950, pre-1967 or post-1967 and sometimes 1960s, 1970s, mid-1970s, or even 1980s<sup>40</sup>.



*Jordan Valley, Exodus, 1967*

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<sup>40</sup> According to the listing of UNRWA films made by the UNRWA HQ in Gaza.





*Jérico 1967*



*Dekwaneh Camp in Beirut (Lebanon), 1975-1976. Photo by Myrtle Winter-Chaumeny*

Tal al-Zaatar, a neighborhood in the eastern outskirts of Beirut included the Dekwaneh Palestinian refugee camp. During the Lebanese civil war, the camp was held under a 52-day siege (as two other camps) and razed to the ground. Survivors scattered in other camps. The rubble in the foreground is what remained of the camp.



*Victims of the Lebanese civil war in Beirut (Lebanon), 1975-6. Photograph by Myrtle Winter- Chaumeny*

“We were a family of 11 persons. We worked hard, my husband’s butcher shop provided a good living for us. Now my husband is dead. My eldest son is dead. Everything we owned is lost. We have no home. I cannot support my children. I cannot support them”. Safiah Hamad (holding a picture of her dead son and his wife) and her eight children are survivors of the 52-day siege of Tal al-Zaatar (summer of 1976) during the Lebanese war. They have found temporary shelter in a small hut at St. Simon Beach on the outskirts of Beirut, the Lebanese capital.

The organization of archives (at least until the 1990s), as evident from the *UNRWA Photo Catalogue* published at the beginning of the 1980s<sup>41</sup> prevents a historical and creative or imaginative thematic reading. The classification reflects the UNRWA’s own organizational structure between Relief and Social Services Department and Education and

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<sup>41</sup> UNRWA, *UNRWA Photo Catalogue*, Vienne, UNRWA Public Information Division, 1983/1984 (not precisely dated).

Health Departments. The photographs are grouped under four broad headings: Refugee living conditions (in which, amongst others, are images documenting historical events, exodus and displacements, the Lebanese civil war, and one of its most harrowing chapters, the Sabra and Shatila massacre); Education for refugee children, Health Care and Arts and Crafts. A complete reorganization of the audiovisual archive, and notably of the photographs was undertaken in the 1990s. It implied searching for ways to date photographs with precision, a new classification, and identifying photographers. This archive has gone through a process of contextualization, re-inscription of history, a sort of reinvention.

The organization of the website mirrors this new conception of the archive and the role that photographs can perform. Two large photo exhibitions showcased on the occasion of the 45<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of UNRWA's creation (the former one was titled *The Long Journey*). In *The Long Journey*, the exhibition chronicles main events in the history of Palestine and the refugees. It starts in 1922, the beginning of the British mandate in Palestine. The UNRWA's photographs are accurately dated, titled, and situated. The website reproduces the photographs, they appear classified around three main sections (photo archives, recent photos and fresh photos), supplemented with historical documents and elaborate information about the UNRWA's current programs and scope of activity. This reclassification has gone hand in hand with an increased interest in audiovisual archives and the place they occupy in Palestinian national history and memory. The film material has been digitalized and stored in good conditions.

The slow breakthrough of history in UNRWA's production of photography as well as films has involved several steps over time. Change can be noted in subject matter, formal approach, in addition to a revised, contextualized readings of images. In film production, old material was re-used in films over time with a completely different purpose, often to serve a historical narrative (such as with *Prelude to Peace*, 1987). The role of photographers and film makers in the UNRW's audiovisual production has been enhanced. Until the 1980s, nearly all films lacked detailed credits. As a result, it was impossible to know who had scripted, filmed or directed. We do know, however, that during that bracket, Myrtle Winter was overseeing production. Filmmakers such as George Nehmeh began to be identified as well as the different technicians soon after. Acknowledgment of the work of different photographers led to a sharper sense of professionalism. It also instigated reading the

photographs from a more artistic purview, they were not only documents but also subjective testimonies on refugee history.

The discrepancy between the photographs and the intention behind their production is striking. In most cases, the objective was to give an account of living conditions, habitat, infrastructures, services. The camps - with tents, prefabricated structure, various shelters and houses - were central to these images. So was the way people coped with harsh environment and surroundings, with the help of the UNRWA. In most of the imagery, the view remains distant, as if people were completely alien to the place where they live or to its surrounding landscape. This sense of distance stands in sharp contrast to the “territorial intimacy” described by Jean-François Chevrier<sup>42</sup> in Marc Pataut’s photographs of the residents of Le Cornillon (a wasteland on which the Stade de France was built in St Denis, near Paris). If the people in Pataut’s photographs were living in an improvised slum because they could not be somewhere else, the pulse of daily life is tangible from the photographs, whereas this is not the case generally with UNRWA’s body of images. This separation and estrangement from the sites, and even from the subject of the photograph, combined with the lack of interaction between people, and with their surroundings convey the impression of a disincarnate reality, an absence of personal history. On the one hand, this absence can be regarded as a limitation from within the process of photography under specific political, institutional and material constraints, performed by photographers who had only started working in the 1950s and 1960s and pretty much learned on the job. On the other hand, the absence might also be understood as a mark or trace of an exile, or how the chroniclers of the Palestinians’ exodus represented the forced displacement and estrangement.

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(Captions – i.e. UNRWA titles and dates - of the photos to be inserted with them in the texts)

- **Picture 1: photos 61:** Wadi Seer, Jordan, 1958
- **Picture 2: rl-nahr el bared-1:** Nahr el Bared (camp), Tripoli, Lebanon, 1952
- **Picture 3: rl-mia mia-4:** Mieh Mieh Camp, near Sidon, Lebanon, 1952
- **Picture 4: 45 :** Gaza strip (?)
- **Picture 5: 41:** (do you have the title and/or date ?)
- **Picture 6: 6:** (do you have the title and/or date?)
- **Picture 7: sl-mar elias-6 :** Mar Elias (Camp), Beirut, early 1950's
- **Picture 8: sg-Khan Younis-1:** School 1950, Khan Younis, Gaza Strip
- **Picture 9: 36 :** do you have the title and date ?
- **Picture 10: 29 :** Aqabat Jaber Camp, Jericho, West Bank
- **Picture 11: 43 :**do you have the title and/or date ?
- **Picture 12: 37 :** Jericho, West Bank
- **Picture 13: rl-jisr el basha-6 :** Jisr el Basha Refugee Camp, Near Beirut, Lebanon, 1952 (photo: Myrtle Winter)
- **Picture 14 : 48 :** do you have the title and/or date ?
- **Picture 15: rw/Jericho/1**
- **Picture 16: 17 :** Exodus from the West Bank, across the river Jordan, 1967
- **Picture 17: 18 :** Exodus from the West Bank, across the river Jordan, 1967
- **Picture 18: dl-dekwaneh-3:** Destruction in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1976) : Dekwaneh Camp in Beirut, Lebanon. Extract from the caption “Following the 52-days siege of Tal Za’atar, Dekwaneh (one of the three Palestine refugee camps located in the middle of fighting zones in Beirut) was razed to the ground.”
- **Picture 19: rl-beirut-5 :** Victims of the Civil War in Lebanon 1975-1976: Beirut, Lebanon. Extract from the caption “S(afia? Intials only?) H(amad )(holding a picture of her dead son and his wife) and her 8 children are survivors of the 52-days siege of Tal al-Za’atar (summer 1976) during the Lebanese civil war.” (photo Myrtle Winter)
- **Picture 20 : 51:** do you have the title and/or date ?

- **Picture 21** : 52 with its entire caption if possible